

SERMON PREACHED AT SJH TRINITY 15 WEEK 23 YEAR B 9 SEPTEMBER 2018

Do we come to church to be challenged? It's probably not uppermost in our expectations. We'd rather be affirmed, told that we've got it right, made to feel comfortable. In some parts of the world, churches that preach the 'prosperity gospel' are flourishing. That's the view that riches are God's will for faithful people. He will reward faith, witness and supporting good causes, by increasing a person's wealth. If you're rich, God must be pleased with you. Often physical health is linked in. If you're sick or poor you don't have the right sort of faith, or maybe your state is the result of sin.

Like most heresies – false teachings – the prosperity gospel takes part of the Jewish/Christian tradition and gives it too much prominence. It could be argued that its followers are stuck at a particular stage of mankind's religious development. It's true that the Israelites were told, as they were about to enter the promised land, that if they kept the commandments they would dwell securely in the land and enjoy good harvests. But centuries later the psalms are full of protest: 'Why do the ungodly prosper?', or 'Why have our enemies defeated us?'. .

A stronger part of our religious tradition is God's purpose to bless the poor and weak. The prophet Isaiah declares

The eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.

There is no mention of the blind, the deaf and so on, doing anything to produce this outcome: it is a gracious gift of God. In the age of salvation, people whose state seems hopeless will find their lives transformed.

This passage of Isaiah is set for today because of its obvious link with the second half of the gospel reading, in which Jesus heals a deaf man with a speech impediment. His condition might have been considered a consequence of sin: his own or his parents'. But one of life's unfortunates now receives divine grace. He is enabled to hear and speak. We can take the account at face value – a 'what Jesus did next' approach – or we can be a bit more imaginative. In last week's gospel Jesus told the crowd,

Listen to me, all of you, and understand... .

What 'normal' people have to be told to do, 'Listen,' comes naturally to the 'special needs' person who has been healed.

His ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly.

The first half of the gospel reading is about Jesus healing a Gentile woman's daughter. We are probably disturbed that Jesus talks about throwing the children's bread to the dogs – surely a racial insult. The explanation is not straightforward: it would be easier to discuss it in a study group than describe it in a sermon. But here goes. A standard feature of rabbis' teaching was to take an existing text and retell it imaginatively to bring out a particular message. There are examples of this in the gospels. The parable of the Good Samaritan is based on a narrative in the 2<sup>nd</sup> book of Chronicles. Behind the Gentile woman incident is the 56<sup>th</sup> chapter of the book of Isaiah. In that chapter there are mentions of

- foreigners who join themselves to the LORD;
- God's house being a house of prayer for all peoples;
- God gathering the outcasts of Israel, and gathering yet others;
- dogs lying down (under the table?) – the dogs in fact resemble unreliable Jewish prophets, rather than Gentiles;
- those dogs having a mighty appetite (eating the scraps?).

There are enough similarities to convince us that Jesus' eventual acceptance of the woman's request is a specific acting-out of the more general prophecy of Isaiah about Gentiles being included in God's people. The Gentile woman has 'joined herself to the Lord.' Taking the Mark and Isaiah passages together, both Jews and Gentiles get described as dogs – and we shouldn't expect people two thousand years ago to have the same sensitivities about race as we do.

So in today's gospel God's blessings are extended to a Gentile woman and to a Jewish man whose afflictions placed him on the fringes of his community. In the New Testament reading, S. James insists that the church community should not make distinctions in how it welcomes and treats people. He focuses on the distinction between rich and poor. Loving one's neighbour as oneself is the royal law of scripture. Showing partiality is a sin. James gives an excellent summary of God's grace:

Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him?

This is the direct opposite of the 'prosperity gospel' I described earlier. Part of the church's witness to society is to be a place where all are accepted equally, because all are loved by God. He wants to bless and heal all – wants us to give up the false gods of health, wealth, race and status, by which we may be judging others. Indeed, we may be judging ourselves as successes or failures by the same criteria: think of social media pressure on teenagers. I think we're approaching a time of

crisis, if we're not already there. Populist movements throughout the world direct fear and hatred towards vulnerable minorities. The phrase 'hostile environment' is seen as a vote-winner: politicians responding to society's attitudes. The church has to show that there is another way, and it is God's way. We have much to learn from the poor and the outsider, because God reaches out to us in our spiritual poverty with the richness of his blessing.